

Keynote address by H.H. Aram I*, Catholicos of Cilicia, 7 June 2005

I greet you as Moderator of the World Council of Churches and express my deep appreciation to you for responding to the Council's invitation. This gathering displays a unique importance for two main reasons: One, this is the first time that an inter-religious conference of such size and scope is taking place at the initiative of the WCC; and, two, this is one of the rare inter-religious meetings in which all living faiths of the world are present. It is my firm expectation that through its deliberations and forward-looking vision, this meeting will introduce a new process into inter-religious dialogue and collaboration.

Inter-religious dialogue has been a permanent concern on the ecumenical agenda. Global developments and emerging new realities have made it an ecumenical priority. In my 2003 report to the Central Committee, I stressed the pivotal importance of inter-religious dialogue for the future course of world history, in general, and for the ecumenical movement, in particular. In my last report to the Central Committee, in February 2005, I said: "The world is sick morally, politically and ecologically. Bringing healing to the broken world is the greatest challenge of our times facing all religions." Therefore, inter-religious dialogue aimed at enhancing greater understanding of each other's' theological teachings and fostering closer relations and broader collaboration must remain a major concern for all religions.

As we gather together under the theme of "thinking together", "assessing the present", and "imagining the future", I want to share with you a few perspectives, which, I hope, will help us in our discussions.

Religion in a new world context

Religion has become a major player on the global scene. Religion has no identifiable boundaries; it has become omnipresent in society and integral to our public and private life. For some, religion is in process of self-articulation and is becoming more relevant by adapting to the new world context; while for others, the credibility of religion itself is at stake. The historical circumstances and tremendous changes taking place in our societies call the religions to engage in a critical process of self-understanding. Clearly, return of religion and return to religion are facts of life. What are the salient marks and implications of this emerging phenomenon?

1) By destroying all geographical, cultural, social, economic, political and racial boundaries and creating interdependence, *globalization* has brought about a sense of insecurity. In fenceless societies, all of us, the strong and the weak, those in the majority and those in the minority, feel equally threatened by each. The otherness of the other generates distrust, even in the context of cohabitation. This sense of insecurity has brought people closer to religion as a safe refuge against the forces of globalization.

2) **Pluralism** is a dominant feature of modern societies. It is reshaping our thinking, our self-understanding, our way of life. Pluralism is both threatening and enriching. It threatens the specificity and integrity of religion by exposing it to cultural homogeneity. Pluralism also enriches a religion by engaging it in creative interaction with other traditions.

3) Concern for **identity** in a globalized world has acquired a new urgency. For some, affirming identity does not mean rejecting the other, since identity is shaped and strengthened in dynamic interaction and not in opposition to others. For others, however, affirming identity implies a reactive and self-protective approach; it means going back to their roots by rejecting the other.

4) Religious identity is often sustained by and even identified with **ethnicity** and **political power**. Politics hijacks religion and exploits religious beliefs, teachings and values for its own ends. The exploitation of religion for ethnic considerations, too, creates an explosive situation by generating tension and polarizing people. The misuse and abuse of religion often develops ambiguous and contradictory trends within and among the religions.

5) **Secularism** and **religiosity** in some religions are in critical and creative dialogue; in others they are simply in conflict. In spite of enormous and unprecedented advances in technology, humanity feels threatened and driven to despair and is searching for meaning and direction. For some, religion should seek to become relevant and responsive to secularization; otherwise, it will lose its impact and become a self-contained reality. . Others feel that religion should actively oppose secularization in order to save itself from desecralization.

Due to these growing trends, briefly described above, religious extremism has, in the last decade, acquired new dimensions and manifestations, with far-reaching consequences.

These are core issues that require comprehensive and deeper scrutiny. They call religions to a critical and realistic self-assessment. They also impel religions to interact creatively, dialogue meaningfully and act efficiently. From the remotest period of history, humanity has tried many "isms"; they have always proved to be temporary. People are now turning to God, to the Absolute, to the Transcendent, as the true source of life and the true way towards the future of humanity.

For a credible dialogue

Interreligious dialogues, which are organized by different players of civil society, including political institutions, have become a salient feature of contemporary societies. The proliferation of inter-religious meetings may eventually undermine the crucial importance of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, if a solid substance and a clear orientation are not given to these encounters. More than at any other time there is a great awareness of the need for a credible and relevant inter-religious dialogue. Only such a dialogue will help religions to reach a coherent and holistic approach to crucial issues

stirring the life of societies, and lead humanity to healing and reconciliation. What are the essential conditions for such a dialogue?

1) By deepening our knowledge of each other, in inter-religious dialogue, we must affirm, assess and respect the integrity and distinctiveness of each religion. This is, indeed, a **sine qua non** condition for any serious dialogue.

2) Dialogue must be guided by a comprehensive approach and broader vision; at the same time it must clearly spell out the existing differences. By creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding, dialogue must provide a proper framework and a broad space for dynamic and critical reflection.

3) If dialogue is to be credible, we must recognize its limits, its limitations and its risks. Exclusiveness causes exclusion, while inclusiveness enhances diversity. Triumphalism generates tension, while the awareness of vulnerability builds community. High expectations create disappointment, while humility deepens mutual confidence. This firm conviction must become the driving force of dialogue.

4) A credible dialogue also requires a contextual and realistic approach. Dialogue does not deal with mere concepts; this is a misconception of dialogue. As an exchange of perspectives and experiences aimed at convergence, dialogue must take place in a concrete milieu, and derive its agenda from its place and be responsive to the particularities of that place.

5) In dialogue we must not only talk with each other; we must listen to each other in the spirit of belonging to a common humanity. God, the ultimate being sometimes speaks to us and challenges us through each other. Therefore, in dialogue we must look at each other through the eyes of God and not through our own theological perceptions, traditions and beliefs. The Ultimate brings us together, while our self-understanding establishes fences around us. Our common humanity and common destiny sustain our unity, while our different experiences and practices keep us away from each other.

6) Credible dialogue does not allow the "otherness" of the other to threaten our security, our identity, our integrity. It shapes and reshapes our attitude towards the other. Credible dialogue challenges the concept of "other" based on our own projection, and leads us to accept the other the way he or she understands himself or herself, and build, enrich and affirm our identity in relation, and not in opposition, to the other.

7) Credible dialogue does not question the claims of other religions, nor does it seek compromise. Rather, it challenges judgmental, absolutist, apologetic, proselytizing approaches and enhances the common search for truth through awareness building and education.

For centuries religions have forged and defined their identities and built their strength on the basis of what separates them. Our differences must not prevent us from dialoguing and working together. Today's world calls for partnership and alliances; it calls

communities to move from self-centred existence to co-existence, from confrontation to interaction, from alienation to collaboration. Deeply rooted in the life of societies, religions cannot remain aloof from this global process.

Seeking common values

In order to achieve a meaningful collaboration people who are engaged in dialogue must seek to live together in mutual empowerment. Dialogue implies a common basis and common objectives. In their search for the common truth, religions must also seek common values that will underpin their co-existence, guide their common reflection and enhance their common action. In fact, the most efficient way of overcoming inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts is, in my view, to strengthen those common values that are at the heart of all religions.

1) If co-existence is to prevail, it must be undergirded by common values. In pluralist societies, religions must go beyond mere cohabitation; they must constantly build communities on the basis of shared values. A shared community entails diversity, yet it is grounded in common values and goals.

2) Unless an inter-religious action is initiated on the basis of core values common to all religions, it will be superficial and will have only a provisional impact. Enhancing core values will also significantly help building mutual confidence, an essential feature of a credible dialogue.

In my judgment, the following areas and issues call for a common action:

a) Religions must seek: i) to promote tolerance; ii) to build peace with justice; iii) to promote global ethics with renewed emphasis; iv) to support the United Nations' initiatives on justice, peace and reconciliation; and v) to provide globalization with a moral basis through their shared values.

The assumption of such a critical role by religions is of pivotal importance at a time when the forces of globalization are destroying values highly revered by religions. Religion has become a fertile ground for people to exploit religious feelings for non-religious goals. Politics is motivated by interests; religion must act on the basis of values. Values, not interests, must be the guiding principle of inter-religious collaboration. In addition to deepening and broadening the common values, we must identify common concerns, develop multi-religious approaches to common issues facing societies, and organize advocacy. These are crucial issues that must be taken most seriously by all religions.

Strengthening the moral authority of religion

Religion is a moral force. The credibility, authority and power of a religion are rooted in the moral values that it upholds. These values constitute the esse and the identity of a religion. They provide a unique vocation to a religion and make it the moral voice of the society and the moral beacon for the world.

With its new value systems and life-styles the globalized world has created a moral vacuum. The political governance does not care about moral values. Moral principles are totally absent from the economic order. National security, economic relations, and geopolitical interests have taken precedence over moral values; they are the new idols that have replaced the old ideological doctrines. We all feel insecure, vulnerable and disoriented. Neither military might nor economic progress can restore real security and ensure integrity. In the midst of anxieties and uncertainties, people are turning to religions and expecting guidance from them.

1) Religions must provide moral leadership in a world where moral values are in decay. We must accept our deficiencies and vulnerabilities in humility. Our theologies, our institutions, our ways of life are strongly affected by anthropocentric and world-oriented values and considerations. The moral authority of a religion is questioned when it uncritically supports a political agenda and relies on worldly power.

2) Religions are called to become the voice of the voiceless and the power of the powerless. They must take the lead of all movements and initiatives in civil society aimed at the restoration of justice, peace and reconciliation. Although power is a means of domination, it is also a source of service. When a religion serves, it becomes a moral authority; when it exercises power identifying itself with political power, then it becomes a political instrument. Any compromise with political power undermines the credibility, authority and integrity of a religion.

3) By its very vocation a religion is called to assume a prophetic role in the life of society. The civil society, including the political world, in difficult times turns to religion for moderation and moral guidance. Hence, religion must become the moral conscience of a society. We often speak about military, political or economic intervention. Humanity primarily needs spiritual intervention. How can religions speak together and with moral authority? How can religions provide a moral framework to a political agenda? How can religions lead societies to healing and transformation? These are serious questions that require thorough scrutiny.

Overcoming violence

The culture of violence has become a dominant reality in the world today. Neither military intervention, political oppression nor legal measures alone can uproot violence. Addressing the root causes of violence is the most effective way of transforming the culture of violence.

Religion is an instrument of peace-building. However, religion has always had its own share in the emergence of the culture of violence. The misuse and abuse of religion has often generated conflict. Religious divergences are often exploited to create tensions. Distrust and intolerance, fueled by extremist views and exclusivist doctrines, have caused violence in many communities. Thus, unholy alliance of religion and violence has become a bitter experience in many regions. It must be noted that violence for some in the form of terrorism and for others as legitimate war has been justified in the name of

religion. In the context of their peace-making efforts, religions must consider the following major concerns:

1) The ambiguity of the religions' engagement in peace-building is evident. On the one hand, religions uphold the cause of peace, and on the other hand, they are, in one way or another, involved in situations of violence. On the one hand, they condemn violence as a means to settle conflict, and on the other hand, they support the legitimization of military intervention. Religion's paradoxical role in this matter creates confusion and polarization, significantly reducing its credibility.

2) Political oppression, socio-economic injustice and growing secularism have led to hate and distrust among religions. This trend needs to be strongly challenged. Overcoming violence in all its forms and manifestations and building a peaceful world must become an urgent priority for all religions. The credibility of a religion is determined by its firm commitment to peace and non-violence. In all inter-religious meetings, religions have strongly rejected all teachings and approaches in the name of religion that support enmity, exclusion and hatred, and have stressed compassion, trust and non-violence as core values. They must pro-actively articulate their vocation as peace builders. They must combat violence by addressing those issues and situations that generate violence; by building a culture of peace with justice; by promoting confidence and understanding between religions, and by leading societies to reconciliation and transformation.

For a vision of one community

The vision of one community is focal in all religions. We live in one world, have a common humanity, and share fundamental values. Commonality is, therefore, a characteristic mark of humanity. Yet, we are different in many ways. Commonality and diversity are both inherent and human-made. We must strengthen our commonalities, and preserve and reconcile our particularities within one broader community. I consider this a great challenge facing religions.

Co-existing in one place and living together as one community are not the same. Co-existence based on political consensus is precarious and provisional; it is a potential source of tension. Living together implies sharing common values, concerns and goals and being in existential and creative interaction. Living together transforms the image of the "other", who is no more a stranger: a neighbour, not a rival, a partner, not a person to be either converted or rejected; one that must be accepted and respected.

How can religions help the pluralist societies to build broader communities of reconciled diversities and shared values? How can religions work together to build inclusive communities that do not leave room for any form of discrimination or exclusion. Our diversities do not divide us. We are divided by intolerance and the exploitation of religious feelings. We are no longer merely dialoguing with each other. We are neighbors in this small world. We are bound to live together. This is God's gift and command. Any attempt that jeopardizes our living together is against the will of God. We must strongly affirm that religions must not promote mutually exclusive communities. Irrespective of

our different self-understandings, we are all part of God's household. We need each other to face common concerns and combat common evils. Therefore,

- 1) We must develop a vision of community where hate is transformed into respect, intolerance into acceptance, isolation into integration.
- 2) We must build communities where, through a process of integration, diversities are enriched and common values are deepened.
- 3) We must organize communities so that working together on issues of common concern may become a continuous process and a quality of being together.
- 4) We must seek new ways of living together as one community, where our self-perceptions are respected, deepened and broadened in dialogical interaction with each other.

Concluding remarks

The United Nations set in its Millennium Declaration what is called Millennium Development Goals, aimed at the eradication of violence, reduction of diseases, combating injustice, uprooting poverty and promoting education. Those committed to these goals have not yet taken any concrete steps forward. Injustice in all its forms and expressions is spreading in all societies. Rich countries are spending more money for military growth than for development, the eradication of injustice, the enhancement of education or promotion of human rights. The culture of violence is increasingly gaining predominance in many communities. Permanent and comprehensive peace and true reconciliation still remain far-reaching goals in different parts of the world.

Religions cannot remain silent and indifferent vis-a-vis this alarming situation. They must act: they must act together and urgently. As Christians we believe that it is God who transforms and humanizes the world. We also believe that God has given us in Jesus Christ the vocation to become His "co-worker". Let us participate in God's transformation of His world, our common household. Let us commit ourselves to make humanity more humane. The new world situation with its complexities, uncertainties and challenges calls for a credible dialogue, greater partnership and closer collaboration between the religions. Can religions promote what I would call a spirituality of reflecting, living and working together, based on common values?

Indeed, dialoguing will make us discover and rediscover each other more truly and fully; and working together will bring a greater awareness of our common calling and make us grow together in our common humanity. The World Council of Churches is committed to serving as a facilitator for this important process. I propose, therefore, that *a Continuation Committee* be formed at this Conference with the following aim:

- to elaborate further the concerns and perspectives as well as the points of convergence and divergence that will emerge in this meeting.

- to seek the appropriate ways and means of implementing the findings and proposals of this conference.
- to ensure inter-religious collaboration on specific issues by creating local, regional and global networks of collaboration and joint action.
- to create at a later stage a global council of religious leaders.

I want to conclude my introductory remarks with an appeal based on a prayer:

Let us be instrument of peace,
Where there is violence.

Let us promote love,
Where there is hatred.

Let us work for reconciliation,
Where there is conflict.

Let us spread hope,
Where there is despair.

Let us be light,
Where there is darkness.

Let us lead the broken world
To healing and transformation.

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